

## RECURRING IMAGE

Authors have lots of ways to help the reader understand what *they* think is really important. They do it by word choice, for example, or word order. They do it by repetition. Smokey Robinson wrote “My Girl” for the Temptations and created such an effective lyrical hook that the phrase is repeated more than thirty times in a song that lasts less than three minutes. Yes, damn it, he’s talkin’ about “my girl, my girl, my girl...”

I learned this lesson—call it the echo effect—in my first college literature class. We were reading one of those thick Russian novels, and our professor asked us to analyze a passage in which a character was disturbed by a fly. I remember going through the novel looking for some clue to unlock this passage, and the best I could do was make reference to an earlier passage in which another fly had made a cameo appearance. “To understand what was happening in this passage,” I offered in class, “I thought I might compare it to the passage where the fly made an earlier landing.” That was it. That’s what the teacher was hoping we would discover.

At first glance, “green breast of the new world” appears to be Fitzgerald’s synonym for the original unspoiled America, colonized by the European explorers and settlers. But there is something suggestive and troubling about that “green breast.” There is an immediate tension, a rub, between the two words. A green breast is a surreal, almost unnatural thing—unless we are talking about Dalí paintings or cartoon ogres. Then we must ask, where do those words come from in the novel? What are their antecedents? The color

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green is easy, with its evocation of the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. That light is what T. S. Eliot would call the objective correlative, the object that correlates to all of Gatsby's regrets, dreams, and aspirations. *Breast* is more troubling. Is the word associated with the female objects of desire in the book—Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker? Early on, Nick describes the athletic Miss Baker as "small-breasted." But much later—and more shockingly and memorably—comes an image of violence and catastrophe, the effects of the hit-and-run killing of Myrtle Wilson: "...when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath." That phrase occurs on page 137 of my edition, late enough to be well remembered by a reader who encounters that "green breast" only forty-three pages later.

#### EXAMPLE TO MEANING

In 1939 a language teacher in Chicago published a book for his college students that remains a classic. The author was S. I. Hayakawa, an expert on semantics (the meanings of words), and the book was *Language in Action*. In that book, Hayakawa introduced to American readers a concept called "the ladder of abstraction." The basic notion was that you could think of a word or phrase—his was "Bessie the cow"—and you could place it near the bottom of the ladder, where words referred to concrete, specific things: "Sadie's wedding ring" or "the broken headlight on Karen's dark green 1966 Mustang convertible" or "that 1956 Mickey

Mantle baseball card—the one with the bent corner—that Roy kept in an old shoe box in his attic for more than fifty years.” These are objects that appeal to the senses. Gatsby’s yellow car, Daisy’s green light, Myrtle’s bloody breast—all these would be placed at the bottom of Hayakawa’s ladder.

What happens in life and literature, of course, is that these objects come to mean something more. Over time, they may take on new meanings. Perhaps the author chooses them to help the reader reach a higher understanding. Even without such authorial intention, the text can come to mean something at a higher level of abstraction. A hundred readers may come away with a hundred different ideas.

This passage in *Gatsby* begins with a sweeping recollection of the “vanished trees” that once seduced the European settlers with their majesty, beauty, and fecundity. This land will be ravaged by those settlers; the trees will disappear to make way for Gatsby’s extravagant mansion; the natural world will be despoiled by the artificial.

The narrative suddenly gains altitude, the language soaring to the level of ideas; with phrases such as “transitory enchanted moment,” “aesthetic contemplation,” and “capacity for wonder.” Such phrases stand atop the ladder of abstraction, inviting the reader to strive for some higher understanding of the characters in this particular story and their connection to the larger, deeper themes of American history and culture.

It astonishes me how Fitzgerald manages to compress the complex and contradictory concerns of American history and culture in a single passage. His main vehicle for this is a constant movement—from concrete to abstract, from particular to general. After offering us a contemplation of what

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the sailors must have felt when they encountered the islands and forests of the New World, the narrator connects that sense of “wonder” (and repeats the word) by recalling what Gatsby must have felt when he looked out at Daisy’s dock and saw the green light.

Gatsby is seduced by a dream: that he can go back in time, erase the past, and begin again in the arms of Daisy. It is interesting to note the collision of colors here, the proximity of the green light to the blue lawn. Shouldn’t the lawn be green? Isn’t grass green? Not in Gatsby’s world. In his world of unnatural aspiration, the grass must be greener than green. It must be blue, as blue as the blood of aristocrats.

#### RIGHT WORD

In rereading my 2004 edition of the book, published by Scribner, I thought I found a misprint: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future...” *Orgastic*? Is that even a word? I checked an earlier edition and found the word as I remembered it. Not *orgastic* but *orgiastic*. I looked up *orgastic* and found that it was an obscure synonym for *orgasmic*. It carried a meaning beyond sexual pleasure—a higher and deeper level of ecstasy. Did Gatsby believe in an ecstatic future?

According to Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli, the author indeed meant *orgastic* and discussed it with his editor, Maxwell Perkins. But in 1941, editor Edmund Wilson thought the word was an error and replaced it with *orgiastic*, which became the version known to a half century of readers. Fortunately, *orgastic* has been restored and was the word spoken by Nick Carraway in the movie. Why fortunately?

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